

On the Road With Paul



Sunday, July 5, 2009

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Scripture: Acts 9: 1-19

Sermon Title: On the Road With Paul

Yesterday we celebrated the anniversary of our nation's conversion experience. On July 4th 1776, we stopped being a colony of England and became a new nation, "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all (people) are created equal..."

Every conversion experience has a death and a resurrection. Something ends and something new begins. The conversion of our nation brought an end to our colonial life and the beginning of our life as a free and independent nation. Death and resurrection are terrifying and exhilarating. In 1776 our forbears were excited about the prospect of finally being free from the domination of English rule, but they were also worried that we lacked sufficient resources and ought to have arranged for foreign aid before severing our ties with mother England.

There was a lot of anxiety among our forbearers in 1776, but every conversion experience has a defining moment when it suddenly becomes clear that there can be no turning back. Our nation's defining moment came on July 4th, 1776 when the final wording of our Declaration of Independence was approved by Congress. In that defining moment, our nation embraced a new name and a new identity. We stopped being the thirteen British Colonies and became the United States of America. The King of England ceased to be our sovereign and instead, "with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge(d) to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor."

But conversions are never neat or succinct. Beyond that defining moment was a long process of adopting and adjusting to a new way of life that continues to unfold today. After the first Fourth

of July celebration was over, the hard work of figuring out how to live out our new identity began in earnest.

Just eleven years later in 1787 a Constitutional Convention was held when it became evident that the original Articles of Confederation were no longer sufficient to govern our nation. A new constitution was drafted and ratified. In 1791 the first ten amendments known as the Bill of Rights were added to our new constitution. Today Supreme Court justices, legislators and members of the executive branch of government are still sorting out the consequences and implications of our nation's conversion experience.

Every conversion experience has a death and resurrection. Every conversion experience has a defining moment. And every conversion experience involves a long and difficult process of learning how to live out our new identity.

Our scripture for today is one of the most famous conversion stories in the Bible, the story of Saul's conversion on the Road to Damascus.

Saul had grown up in Tarsus, an ancient city in what is now south central Turkey, but his parents sent him to Jerusalem to be schooled by some of the best teachers of torah law. He had quickly earned the respect and admiration of the temple leaders and was entrusted with authority to put down a new heretical movement known as the followers of The Way that was undermining the sanctity of Mosaic Law. Saul was extremely zealous in persecuting these young followers of Jesus. He had instigated the stoning of Steven, the first Christian martyr, and had been deputized to round up Christians anywhere he could find them and bring them back to Jerusalem in chains to stand trial for heresy.

Saul was traveling to Damascus to arrest the followers of Jesus there when he had a conversion experience that brought an abrupt end to his life as Pharisee. His defining moment came when Saul was blinded by a bright light that stopped him in his

tracks and left him incapacitated so that he could no longer continue doing what he was doing. That is the way conversion experiences often begin for us. Something happens that forces us to stop doing what are doing.

When Saul was struck blind, he heard the voice of Jesus saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” That was all there was. Saul’s conversion experience was more death than resurrection. He knew he couldn’t go on doing what he was doing, but he had no idea what to do next. There were no additional details provided, no plan outlining the next steps he should take, no bold new vision to guide him forward. The only thing that Saul could do after his conversion experience on the Road to Damascus was go into the city and wait.

Waiting may be the hardest part of any conversion experience. When our lives get disrupted, we expect immediate clarity about what to do next. We want someone to tell us the ten easy steps to discovering our new and rewarding life. We want to know the seven guiding principles that will help us maximize our potential for beginning anew. But conversion experiences are messy. They take time, and waiting is often the most difficult part of the process for us.

Saul’s blindness lasted for three days, and while he waited in Damascus his days were filled with prayer and fasting and contemplation.

Every good resurrection story begins “on the third day,” and so does Saul’s. On the third day of his blindness Saul was visited by a follower of Jesus named “Ananias.” Ananias was having his own conversion experience. He had been living in fear of Saul after hearing the news of Steven’s death and the violent campaign that Saul and his henchmen were carrying out against the followers of the Way. But when Ananias learned that Saul had been struck blind, instead of rejoicing Ananias felt drawn to go to Saul and share the Good News of Jesus with him. Somehow Ananias came to believe that God could use Saul as an instrument for spreading the gospel throughout the gentile

world. So he went and visited Saul, and greeted him not as an enemy, but as a brother. Ananias helped Paul begin to sort out the new life that God was calling him to live.

The conversion of Saul the persecutor of the church to Paul the great Christian evangelist was long and difficult process. The apostles in Jerusalem never did really warm up to Paul. They remained cautious and skeptical towards him. But Barnabas, one of the most trusted leaders of the first church, took Paul under his wing and became his strongest advocate.

Paul had a very strong willed personality and sometimes he alienated people by being overly forceful and unwilling to compromise. Sometimes he tried to do too much at one time and spread himself too thin to provide the kind of support that young leaders needed as they struggled to start new faith communities in places like Corinth, Ephesus and Thessalonica. Most of the stories we have about Paul's work as an evangelist end disastrously. He was beaten, imprisoned and on several occasions narrowly escaped being killed by angry mobs. But all of the letters that he wrote to the churches he started include warm words of gratitude and thanksgiving to the people of faith who supported and encouraged him in his ministry.

Paul's conversion experience gave him a new name, a new identity and a new sense of purpose in life. Even with all of the struggles and hardships he experienced in his new life as a Christian evangelist, Paul knew that he was doing what God was calling him to do.

All of us have our own conversion experiences and they always involve death and resurrection. Something ends and something new begins. They are terrifying and exhilarating experiences that leave us excited about the new possibilities but frightened by loss of what was familiar to us.

Most of the time our defining moments are thrust on us suddenly and unexpectedly when we are blinded by something that stops us in our tracks: a cancer diagnosis is confirmed, a job

is suddenly terminated, divorce papers get served, a retirement fund disappears... In those defining moments we suddenly realize that life will never be the same. There is no going back and yet the way forward is far from clear.

That is when the waiting begins. But if we wait prayerfully, as Paul did in Damascus, then we can be confident that God will send someone like Ananias into our lives as well. The right person will come with the right message at the right moment when we are ready to receive it.

Every conversion experience is a long and difficult process. Sometimes we will make mistakes and get off track. Sometimes we will have to change our plans and start over again. But there will always be brothers and sisters in Christ who support and encourage us as we claim our new name and live out our new identity in Christ. Amen.

